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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR UPCOMING ELECTIONS IN THREE NORTHEAST STATES

REF: KOLKATA 1

¶1. (U) Summary: Nagaland, Tripura and Meghalaya - all states in Northeast India - are scheduled for state assembly elections in February on completion of their 5-year terms. Following its defeat in the Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh Assembly elections, the Congress Party (Congress) will try to retain/recapture its traditional strongholds in Northeast India. Of the three states, Congress is currently in power only in Meghalaya although of the three major national parties (Congress, Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), and Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPM) Congress traditionally has the widest network in the NE region. Since 2003, Nagaland has been ruled by the BJP-backed Democratic Alliance of Nagaland (DAN) until the recent imposition of President's Rule on January 3. Tripura has been under the CPM-led Left Front for three consecutive terms since 1993. End Summary.

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Meghalaya: Congress Relies on Local Political Allies  
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¶2. (U) In 2003, the Congress-led Meghalaya Democratic Alliance (MDA) earned a convincing majority in the assembly elections. The Congress won 22 seats, the United Democratic Party (UDP) 9, the Meghalaya Democratic Party (MDP) 4, Khun Hyniewtrep National Awakening Movement (KHNAM) 2 and Independents 3. The only significant opposition party, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), was led by former Lok Sabha Speaker P.A. Sangma and won 14 seats with others winning 6 seats. Meghalaya has a history of political instability -- between 1998 and the last assembly elections in 2003, Meghalaya had six governments and four chief ministers. Congress's D.D. Lapang became Chief Minister in March 2003 but owing to factionalism within the party, he was replaced by J.D. Rymbai in June 2006. In March 2007, Lapang became Chief Minister again.

¶3. (U) Politics in Meghalaya is fractured, with no strong tradition of party loyalty. Politicians are currently focused on securing party tickets for the election. If denied, they will quickly look to switch allegiances and join other parties willing to accommodate them. Former Chief Minister Rymbai, for example, left the Congress to join the UDP. In this environment, the Congress will find it difficult to get an absolute majority. The state's smaller parties will play a crucial role in the numbers game that will determine the nature of a new ruling coalition. Alliances will be formed after election results are announced. In the Garo Hills area (dominated by ethnic Garos) the main contest will be between

Sangma's NCP and the Congress. In the Khasi Hills, Congress will compete with other regional parties.

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Tripura: Left Bastion  
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14. (U) In Tripura, the Left Front's influence has increased with each election since 1993. In 2003, the Left won 41 of the 60 assembly seats (CPM - 38, Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) - 2, CPI - 1.). The CPM is still going strong, although its smaller partner, the Forward Bloc, has announced it will contest the elections on its own and not as part of the Left Front.

15. (U) The Congress, in alliance with the Indigenous Nationalist Party of Tripura (INPT), won 19. The INPT is political organization representing the interests of the insurgent group National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT). The Congress has once again forged an alliance with the INPT for these elections. However, factionalism within the Congress is now at its worst and renders its prospects bleak, especially when contrasted with the Left's solidarity.

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Nagaland: Defections to Congress  
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16. (U) Prior to President's Rule being imposed in January 2007 (reftel), Nagaland's DAN coalition government consisted of the Nagaland People's Front (19), BJP (7), Janta Dal - United (3), Samata Party (1), National Democratic Movement (3) and Independents (4). The Congress was the single largest party with 21 seats in the 60 member assembly. Desperate in their bid to regain power in Nagaland, Congress legislators campaigned in New Delhi and finally succeeded in getting the United

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Progressive Alliance government to impose Central rule in the state "to facilitate free and fair elections," which they believe would not be possible under DAN governance. At least 12 legislators from DAN have defected to Congress. In the 2003 polls, the National Socialist Council of Nagalim - Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM) had supported DAN because the group considered Congress leader S.C. Jamir to be its arch enemy. However, this time Jamir may not contest (although his son is a likely candidate), which may reduce the NSCN-IM hostility towards the Congress.

17. (U) A "third front" made up of parties like the RJD, JD(U) and BSP is emerging in Nagaland as elections approach. Seeing the NPF and BJP on the one hand, and Congress on the other, the third front leaders hope to win enough seats to make their participation in government formation crucial.

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Playing UPA's Look East Policy  
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18. (U) Congress party leaders in New Delhi are making attempts to woo Northeastern voters by highlighting the region's benefits from the GOI's "Look East Policy" through regional conferences organized by MEA in recent months. On January 11, the GOI organized a Northeast Investors Summit in Guwahati, Assam, bringing together state representatives from the region. Highlighting economic development is not without its drawbacks, however. Congress support for uranium mining in Meghalaya has met with opposition from the public and civil society organizations.

19. (U) Comment: Each of the three Northeastern states have their own unique local factors that will determine the electoral outcome. Election dates have been set for February 23-March 3, but campaigns and alliances are still uncertain. Promises of economic development have been the norm in the past, and the electoral pattern in the economically backward Northeast is to vote in favor of the party or alliance ruling at the Center to

ensure the continued flow of funds into the state coffers. Although this factor may help the Congress in Nagaland, it probably will not in Tripura, where the CPM's strength is still overwhelming. In Meghalaya, the number of parties vying for power indicates that many backroom agreements will be necessary to stitch together a coalition government.

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